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ABSTRACT

On performance tasks, individuals tend to attribute success to their own ability and effort while attributing failure to task difficulty and luck. To investigate the possiblity that the asymmetry in causal attributions for positive and negative outcomes occurs independent of any bias resulting from self-presentation concerns, 80 female college students matched word associations under two experimental conditions: public/private and success/failure. In the public condition, subjects placed their names on test forms and had their scored forms returned by name. In the private condition, subjects used a number for identification and placed their tests in an envelope and box; scored forms were returned to the box and subjects individually removed their own forms. Subjects were randomly assigned to a task outcome condition, either success or failure. After distribution of the graded forms, subjects rated their perceptions of anonymity, success, and attributions of causality on a 7-point scale. An analysis of the results showed that asymmetrical causal attributions for success (internal) and failure (external) existed only when there was public knowledge of participants' performance. Subjects in this situation did not perceive success as internally caused and failure as externally determined, but presented a distorted view of causality in order to manage positive impressions to a significant audience. (BL)

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Self-serving biases: Private perception or public distortion?

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Abstract

Subjects either succeeded or failed on a task when performance and attributions for task outcome were assessed under either public or private conditions. Internal and external attributions and manipulation checks were obtained. Internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure were found under public but not private conditions.

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The self-serving attributional bias: Private perception or public description.

Research on achievement tasks (e.g., Davis & Davis, 1972; Fitch, 1970; Miller, 1976) has shown that people do not use the same explanations to account for a success and a failure. Instead some systematic bias or distortion in judgment leads individuals to attribute successes to their own ability and effort while attributing failure to task difficulty and luck.

In a recent article, Bradley (1978) contends that all demonstrations of this self-serving bias have involved public knowledge of both the individuals performance and their attributions. Therefore, the self-serving bias may be "mediated by a desire to maintain or gain a positive public image rather than a concern for one's private self-image"(p.63). Thus, Bradley has interpreted the self-serving bias within the context of self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1975; Tedeschi, 1981) with individuals viewed as motivated to seek credit for positive outcomes and avoid responsibility for failures in order to engender a positive identity to others. According to this view, individuals' actual perceptions of causality for their outcomes are not biased. Instead, individuals distort their public descriptions of causality by accepting or denying responsibility in order to promote favorable impressions of themselves to others. Therefore eliminating an individuals self-presentational concerns by providing private feedback about task performance and privately assessing individuals' attributions should result in an elimination of the self-serving bias effect.

Since many of the attributions individuals make may be private and not expressed to an audience it is important to determine if the asymmetry in causal attributions for success and failure occurs indepedent of self-presentational concerns. Conceivably, the attributions individuals express to others for public outcomes may differ from the causal attributions that

are truly believed. Thus, previous studies demonstrating an asymmetry in causal attributons may reflect a self-presentation bias in descriptions of causality rather than an intrapsychic bias in perceptions of causality.

The present study was designed to investigate the possibility that the asymmetry in causal attributions for positive and negative outcomes occurs independent of any bias resulting from self-presentation concerns. Thus, participants did either better or worse than average on an ego-involving task for which both their performance and their attributions were either public or private. A pattern of self-serving attributions in the private conditions would provide evidence that the asymmetry in causal attributions for success and failure outcomes occurs independent of self-presentation concerns.

Method

Subjects: Eighty female undergraduates participated in groups ranging from 4 to 6 and were randomly assigned to public or private condition. Individuals within the groups were randomly assigned to either success or failure condition. Six female experimenters and two male assistants were randomized across conditions.

Procedure: Subjects were tested in small groups. The experimental task was a purported Social Intelligence Test (Kuiper, 1978) which called for the subjects to state the most common word associate for each of 100 stimulus words. The 100 words were chosen from word association lists such that each word had two associates with approximately equal probability of selection. This was done in order to enhance the plausibility of the success-failure feedback.

The stimulus words were presented individually on slides. Subjects were told that the test was an index of interpersonal empathy. Subjects task was to give the word most people would associate with the word appearing on the screen. After all 100 words were presented subjects in

the public condition were instructed to place their name in the space provided and the experimenter collected the papers. Subjects in the private conditions placed a five digit number in the space provided, placed the same number on an envelope and small card which accompanied the form. They then inserted the form in the envelope, retaining the card, and placed the envelope in a box circulated for that purpose.

All protocols were turned over to an experimental assistant who scored the protocols in a separate room. For subjects in private conditions it was pointed out that the experimenter had no way to match subjects to protocols and would not know how individuals performed on the test.

The experimental assistant randomly assigned the forms to task outcome condition. Forms were graded following a standardized procedure. Success and failure feedback was manipulated by a handwritten note indicating either the subject scored in the top 80% or the bottom 20%.

The graded forms were restored to the subjects. In the public condition the experimenter returned the form to the subjects by reading the name on the form, glancing at the subject and looking at the bottom of the form--to give the impression she was reading the assistants' note--and finally handing the form to the subject. In the private conditions the experimenter handed the box containing the protocols to one of the subjects who withdrew their protocol and passed the box onto the next person who did likewise.

Subjects were then given a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of anonymity, success, and attributions to causality on 7-point scales. Attached to the questionnaire was a large envelope, subjects were requested to either place their name (public) or their number (private) on the form and envelope, to answer all questions and then place all papers in the large envelope. When all subjects had completed this procedure, the envelopes were collected by the experimenter and subjects were debriefed.

Results

Manipulation checks. Private subjects claimed the experimenter was less aware of their task performance (M=2.90) than public subjects (M=4.12), $F(1,72)=9.69$, $p < .001$. Successful subjects claimed their performance was more successful (M=4.80) than failure subjects (M=2.32), $F(1,72)=53.73$, $p < .001$.

Dependent measures. Analysis was performed on a composite internal-external attribution index (derived by summing the attributions to internal items (ability and effort) and subtracting the attributions to external items (task difficulty and luck). Thus, the more positive the index the more internal the attribution.

Analysis on the composite score revealed a nonsignificant main effect for task outcome, $F(1,72)=1.75$, $p > .19$. Subjects in the success conditions (M=-.07) and failure conditions (M=-.87) did not differ significantly in their attributions to these factors. The anonymity X task outcome interaction was significant, $F(1,72)=4.97$, $p < .03$. Comparisons indicated public subjects made more internal attributions for a success (M=1.10) than for a failure (M=-1.05), $F(1,72)=6.31$, $p < .01$, while private subjects made similar attributions for a success (M=-1.25) or a failure (M=-.70), $F(1,72)=.41$, $p > .50$.

Implications and Conclusions

Results from the present study demonstrated asymmetrical causal attributions for success and failure outcomes only when there was public knowledge of the participants' performance. These results suggest that subjects in this situation did not perceive success as internally caused and failure as externally determined but presented a distorted view of causality in order to manage positive impressions to a significant audience (i.e., the experimenter). An information-processing explanation for the self-serving bias cannot readily account for these results since

it is unclear how obtaining performance feedback and making task evaluations privately would affect individuals' information-processing.

It seems reasonable that the findings of the present study may reflect a pervasive phenomenon and that many of the previous studies that utilized ego-involving tasks and found the self-serving pattern of attributions (e.g., Miller, 1976; Snyder, Stephan & Rosenfield, 1976) may have also elicited self-presentation concerns. Hopefully future research that carefully distinquishes between public and private attributions will further our understanding of this phenomena.

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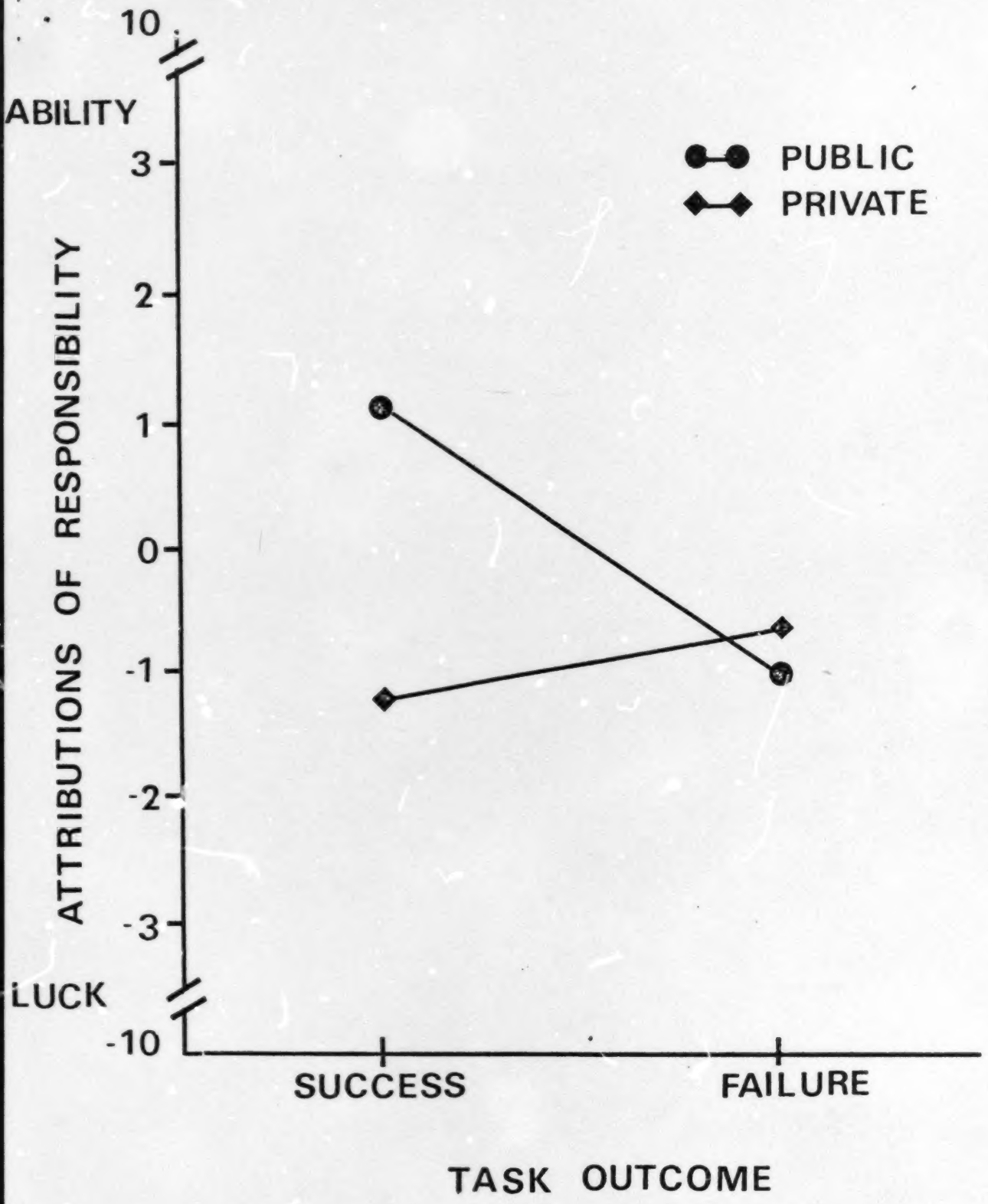
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